Helping restore Waikiki’s Hawaiian music tradition

Music and rhythm are essential elements of Pacific island culture, particularly in Hawai‘i. This is why I have been so pleased to watch the success of the Kani Ka Pila Grille at Outrigger Reef Waikiki Beach Resort as it brings more and more authentic Hawaiian music back to Waikiki.

Although I was never a musician myself, I grew up in Hawai‘i with a lot of music around me. As teenagers, my friends and I would gather on the beach, and somebody inevitably would pull out their ‘ukulele or guitar to get things going.

When Roy and Estelle Kelley opened the Edgewater Hotel in 1951, located where the parking garage of the Embassy Suites® – Waikiki Beach Walk® now stands, they hired local musicians Splash and Freckles Lyons to provide music nightly as guests enjoyed cocktails next to what was then Waikiki’s first hotel swimming pool. The distinctive rolling sounds of the electric Hawaiian steel guitar that group played still bring back great memories and emotions to me.

Then, regrettably, Hawaiian music faded from the Waikiki entertainment scene. The focus switched to individual performers, modern rock, disco, karaoke and Hollywood-style productions.

Many years ago, when the Outrigger Reef’s pool and lobby areas were undergoing a major renovation, I insisted that we include a venue where our guests could enjoy true Hawaiian music every night of the week. That led to the creation of the ponds and lush foliage near the entrance and, later, the area now called the Kani Ka Pila Grille.

Today, under the inspiring leadership of Luana Maitland, visitors and local residents alike are enjoying a strong revival of true Hawaiian music seven nights a week. On Wednesday evenings, Cyril Pahinui and his group reprise many of the songs that his father, the legendary slack key guitar master Gabby Pahinui, recorded years ago. The rest of the week, other winners of Nā Hōkū Hanohano Awards – Hawai‘i’s Grammys – artists like Sean Na‘auao, Weldon Kekauoha, Kawika Kahiapo, Nathan Aweau, Hōkū Zuttermeister and Kuana Torres-Kahele – play Kani Ka Pila Grille on a regular basis.

Currently, the Kani Ka Pila Grille is once again sponsoring its annual Talent Search, which encourages musicians young and old to preserve, play and enjoy making true Hawaiian music.

Every year, the number of Talent Search entrants grows, and it gets harder to pick finalists and winners. But that’s a good thing. We believe in giving up-and-coming groups the opportunity to play in Waikiki. What’s surprising is that we’ve also rediscovered some old-timers. They

2015 Nā Hōkū Hanohano winner Kawika Kahiapo and friends perform at Kani Ka Pila Grille
played music when they were young and, maybe, went to college and moved away. Life got busy. Now, they’re retired and still find they have Hawaiian music in their hearts. They’re bringing back the old-time Hawaiian songs too. It’s great fun.

The Kani Ka Pila Grille is just one way that Outrigger is promoting the rebirth of Hawaiian culture and music. This summer and beyond,

- Outrigger is the presenting sponsor of the Waikiki Aquarium’s Ke Kani O Ke Kai Summer Concert Series, which runs from June to August.
- In July, Outrigger will partner with Waikiki Beach Walk® and the Hawaiian Steel Guitar Association to put on the sixth annual Waikiki Steel Guitar Festival.
- Also in July, the Ala Moana Hotel, an Outrigger-affiliated property, will be the official hotel sponsor of the 45th annual ‘Ukulele Festival.
- And in August, ki ho‘alu, or slack key, will take center stage at Kani Ka Pila Grille with the restaurant’s annual Hawaiian Slack Key Jam in advance of the Hawaiian Slack Key Guitar Festival at Kapi‘olani Park.

Bitsy Kelley was recently quoted in the Honolulu Star-Advertiser as saying, “With the launch of the program named Outrigger E Mele Ana, Outrigger Resorts is reigniting its commitment to Hawaiian music. We’ve tried to create a wide variety of programs that grow beyond what we created six years ago when we made a home for Hawaiian music with the opening of the Kani Ka Pila Grille.”

My deepest thanks to all those who are working together every day to restore the love and appreciation of true Hawaiian music.